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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3225

INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE

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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 3003

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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001449

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA

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DIA FOR LARSON/CRONIN/KRAUSE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/07/2018

TAGS: PREL PGOV PINR MCAP MARR IR LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: LEBANESE GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS ON SYRIAN BORDER MOVEMENTS

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Defense Minister Elias Murr discussed recent reports of Syrian troop deployments near the northern border of Lebanon on October 6, but did not seem overly concerned with this development. Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander General Jean Kahwagi was also present and indicated troop positions on a map in the MinDef's office. The reported purpose for these Syrian troops deployments is to combat smuggling and to contain extremists in northern Lebanon that might try to enter Syria, they said. Similarly, President Sleiman and Prime Minister Siniora said they were not overly concerned; Sleiman said he accepted the Syrians' explanation. US statements warning Syria received wide media coverage on October 7. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) The Ambassador and visiting DOD-State Joint Military Commission team visited Minister of Defense Elias Murr at his office in Yarze on Monday, October 6 (JMC covered septel). Murr and LAF Commander Kahwagi discussed Syrian troop movements near Lebanon's northern border with Syria. Ambassador and DAS Hale also discussed this subject in October 7 meetings with President Sleiman and PM Siniora.

WE SAW TANKS MOVING TO
BORDER YESTERDAY, 5 OCT

¶3. (C) LAF G-2 (military intelligence) BH Fadel had informed us late in the evening of October 5 that the LAF had observed Syrian troop and tank movements on the Syrian side of the border moving on the road from Homs. He provided no details on numbers. He told DATT that the G-2 was "alert" to this movement and that he understood that this deployment was meant to "deal with extremist elements." The next morning, DefMin Murr, asked about press reporting on Syrian military movements towards the northern Lebanese border, told us that this was indeed happening. Murr then turned to LAF Commander Kahwagi and asked him to brief us on the details.

¶ 4. (C) Kahwagi used the topographical relief map hanging in the MinDef's office to brief. Kahwagi said, "yesterday, we saw lots of tanks moving to the border from Homs. We followed them. This morning, we saw them spread all along the border, two kilometers back in Syrian territory." While explaining this, Kahwagi indicated, with his finger, a line of deployment that began on the Mediterranean coast and went to the easternmost corner of the northern border of Lebanon.

¶ 5. (C) Kahwagi also told us that he has spoken with Syrian Chief of Staff General Habib to discuss this deployment. According to Kahwagi, Habib stated that the deployment was to prevent smuggling and to keep extremists in northern Lebanon from escaping into Syria. Kahwagi then opined that the Syrians do not want the terrorists in Tripoli to link up with extremists in Syria. While the media is reporting 10,000 Syrian troops on the Lebanese border, Kahwagi does not think this is accurate. Kahwagi told us that this type of operation would require a large number of troops, possibly in the range of two to three brigades, but not 10,000. Kahwagi told us that his troops are already hearing small arms fire on the Syrian side of the border suggesting that the Syrian troops were already engaged in operations. (Privately, Kahwagi, while not expressing particular concern about the Syrian activities, told the Ambassador over the JMC lunch that "Syria won't do anything if they know that you won't let them".)

PRESIDENT SLEIMAN TALKING WITH DAMASCUS:
WE WILL NOT ACCEPT SYRIANS ENTERING LEBANON

BEIRUT 00001449 002 OF 003

¶ 6. (C) After Kahwagi completed his briefing, MinDef Murr told us that President Sleiman was also aware and involved in this matter. Murr related that Sleiman had spoken to Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad on Sunday, October 5 to confirm that this deployment fell within the framework of common border security that he and Asad discussed during his trip to Damascus. According to Murr, Asad responded in the affirmative.

¶ 7. (C) Murr assessed that the Syrians are now concerned with reaping the harvest they sowed in Lebanon meaning that the Syrians recruited, trained and supported the extremists in northern Lebanon. "Now the Syrians are trying to protect themselves from the people that they have employed," said Murr. Murr thought that the Turks could tell us more about these Syrian military operations since the Turks are heavily involved with the indirect talks between Syria and Israel.

¶ 8. (C) In any case, Murr assured us that President Asad has assured Lebanon that the Syrian troops have no intention to enter Lebanon. However, if they do enter Lebanon, "we will defend ourselves," said Murr.

PRESIDENT SLEIMAN CONFIRMS TALKS WITH ASSAD

¶ 9. (C) Ambassador and DAS Hale met with President Michel Sleiman on October 7. Sleiman said Kahwagi and Murr had told him the Syrian troops were "not a danger." He confirmed that he had spoken to Asad, who told him the troop deployment was an effort to combat smuggling, which Sleiman said was in line with his discussions with Asad in Damascus, as well as with UNSCR 1701. Sleiman told us that he was taking this answer from the Syrians at face value, and that Asad insisted he was sincere in trying to help Lebanon.

¶ 10. (C) Sleiman said that after his September 25 meeting with President Bush, he had pushed the Syrians about stopping terrorists crossing the border and stopping arms smuggling. Asad had responded positively, Sleiman said. Sleiman was certain the Syrians will not enter Lebanon, and that he hoped their presence would stop weapons smuggling. In response to

DAS Hale's question about why the Syrians only deployed to the north, and not along their entire border with Lebanon, Sleiman said that the Syrians had "a history" with the northern border, through which Muslim Brotherhood extremists came into Syria to fight the Syrian government in the 1980s.

PM SINIORA ALSO WEIGHS IN ON DISCUSSION

11.(C) Ambassador and DAS Hale also met with PM Siniora on October 7. Siniora raised the issue of Syrian deployment in an overall discussion of his concerns of late. &Nobody thinks the Syrians have mobilized troops along the border for actual deployment into Lebanon. The Syrians aren't that stupid) they know that the move would be unacceptable to the international community, particularly in the Muslim world," said Siniora.

¶12. (C) While they have said they are there to stop smuggling, the Syrians typically aid the smugglers, said Siniora. Somewhat ironically, Siniora mused, "They've said they are afraid of extremists entering into Syria from Lebanon) but the reverse has historically been true, especially with those we caught in Nahr Al Barid." Siniora assesses that Syria is trying to intimidate the population in the north and to magnify the real problems with conservative fundamentalists that Lebanon has in the area. "They are masters at highlighting a problem that) it turns out) only they can solve," said Siniora.

US COMMENTS ON SYRIAN ACTIVITY WIDELY COVERED

BEIRUT 00001449 003 OF 003

¶13. (C) Lebanese press reported prominently on October 7 the comments by DAS Hale and the Department press spokesman warning Syria that intervention in Lebanon is unacceptable, and that recent bombings in Damascus and Tripoli cannot be used as pretexts for hostile action against Lebanon.

COMMENT

¶14. (S) From our side of the border, we believe the GOL is not overly alarmed by these reports at this time. We have has no information that indicates there are any tanks in that area or that the number of troops is anywhere close to 10,000, as press has reported.

¶15. (C) Some Lebanese political figures have expressed concern to us, and their contacts in Washington, about the Syrian activities. We have told our political contacts here (including March 14 interlocutors) that we have made our policy clear to the Syrians, both publicly and privately, that any incursion into Lebanon would be unacceptable and that we have seen no sign of the alleged 10,000 troops or tanks. We will continue to cite the strong USG statements directed at Syria and the absence of information suggesting hostile Syrian intent. We recommend repeating the strong USG statements if there is any indication of new or different Syrian activity at the border. Although the Syrian military activities may lead Lebanese authorities to decide they need to take stronger action to deal with the violence in Tripoli, we detect no movement toward that. End Comment.

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